



Adam Whone

Violin dealer, restorer and consultant

NEWSLETTER

Incorporating



Autumn 2003



Vn bow by A. Lamy

Welcome to readers of Newsletter Autumn 2003.

This last year has been particularly busy at the workbench. A number of important restorations have taken place, including the revival of a superb Joseph filius Andrea Guarneri violin (the father of 'del Gesu') and the fine Mori Costa violin pictured on this page and page four (read more about it below). On the showroom front, I have expanded and now have a new room in which much of the history of Withers is displayed and where clients can try out instruments and bows with ease. The old showroom has become a much-needed extension to the workshop.

The life of a violin restorer is never dull, and in this issue's Notes from the Workshop I describe what was for me a thrilling detection story. Also included is an interview with one of the country's leading string quartets, and the customary extract from *Notes from a Scraper*, a book written in 1951 but whose sentiments I suspect might have some resonance to this day...

Being faced with having to find a decent instrument or bow with little prior experience, and even knowing whom to speak to in order to get good advice, can be a harrowing prospect. It is crucial for the purchaser to be able – with no undue pressure – to make such an important decision with proper consideration of all the implications. I have always believed in the importance of offering straightforward and honest advice, and even if that instrument or bow seems as elusive as ever, it is better to choose wisely in the short term and have peace of mind later. I have instruments and bows of the highest order for sale, but also a wide range ideal for the serious student to the professional – and I'm happy to take the time to advise at every level.

MAJOR DISCOUNTS

In particular I am offering this autumn/winter a *special saving for students* in many lower to mid range items, which include an *extensive collection of bows, many of them excellent examples by Hill*. I am also offering a student discount of **20%** on all strings and most accessories.

Along with instruments in the higher price category, I have a range of **exceptional French and English bows** – please turn to the back page. If an item is unavailable here, I am always glad to offer advice or do my best to obtain it.

Please call for further information or to make an appointment. Meanwhile, read on, and I hope you enjoy this long-overdue issue of Newsletter!

Notes from the Workshop

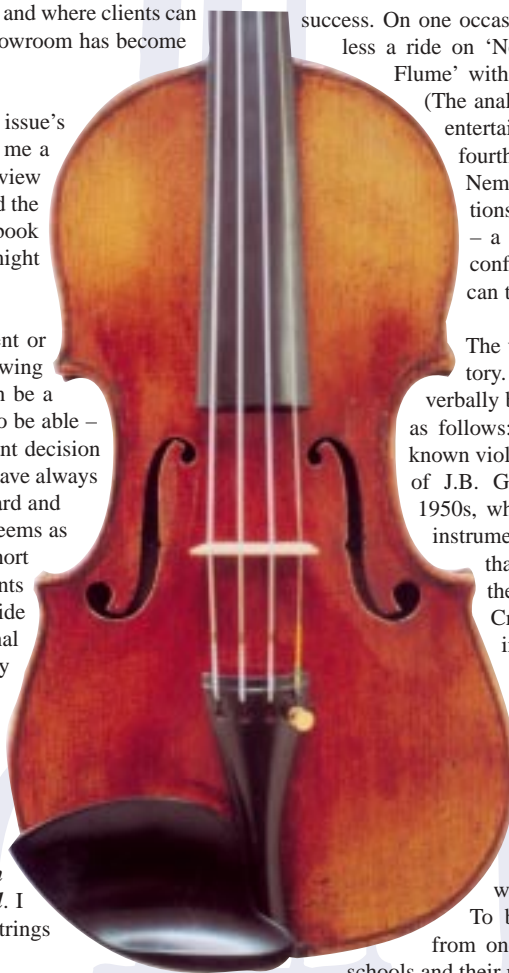
Every so often a real puzzler of an instrument will present itself, when I can fasten on my detective's hat and look forward to a roller-coaster ride of mystery and discovery. This can end up with either a distinct feeling of nausea at the realisation of misguided assumptions, or elation and triumph at success. On one occasion recently, the instrument in question gave me less a ride on 'Nemesis' than the stately experience of the 'Log Flume' with its occasional (but very worthwhile) surprises. (The analogy, by the way, is fresh in my mind having just entertained my teenaged children at Alton Towers for the fourth (and surely the last) time. I didn't actually ride on Nemesis, but I recognized in others a few of the emotions that may be concordant with the world of violins – a naive sense of well-being, trepidation, disbelief, confusion, surprise, elation, wonderment at what life can throw at you, and so on.)

The violin I was presented with had an intriguing history. According to the owners – and this was received verbally by them from the previous owners – the story was as follows: at around the turn of the 20th century a well known violin firm stated that in their opinion it was the work of J.B. Guadagnini. This attribution remained until the 1950s, when the same firm was again presented with the instrument. On reflection, they were now of the opinion that though the belly was by Guadagnini, the rest of the instrument was the work of G.B. Ceruti of Cremona. This was the situation when I received the instrument for sale.

There was no rush to sell the fiddle, so I was able to have it around for some time whilst collecting my thoughts. But doubts about the revised, 1950s attribution were already becoming stronger.

Usually, it is quite straightforward to judge whether the belly and back of an instrument belong. To begin with, the purfling material varies widely from one instrument to another (especially by different schools and their makers), and if a belly or back were foreign to the rest, it would show in most cases in the purfling. However, in this case, the purfling of the table had been largely replaced due to wear of the edges, and where it was original it was not clear enough to easily identify. There was, however, original varnish on this seemed to match reasonably well with the varnish on the rest of the instrument, suggesting that the table might in fact belong. However, if the belly was a Guadagnini and it did belong, this was not borne out by the rest of the violin, which, though exceptionally nice, showed signs of being neither a Guadagnini nor a Ceruti.

Time was getting on and the violin had to be offered for sale sooner rather than later, so it was time to take off the belly and have a good root around inside. Sometimes vital clues can be gleaned from the inside work of an instrument – it is the things that makers do routinely that make their work recognisable and this is as evident inside the instrument as out. Also, there were various things that needed to be done to the table before offering for sale – a couple of cracks and some slight distortion, a new bass-bar, some retouching, etc. The rest of the instrument was perfect with the exception of needing a neck graft – a standard job where the old neck is too badly worn or damaged in some way.



Felix Mori Costa
Parma 1806



Felix Mori Costa
1806

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Slowly, as I eased off the belly with an opening knife, and the belly edge pinged and popped away from the ribs, the light of day shone upon the dusty interior for the first time in perhaps a century. A few moments later, and having cleared the dust – especially around the lower block where it tends to accumulate – I could begin a proper inspection. As I peered at the grey landscape my heart skipped a beat. In quite discernible black ink along the inside of the bottom rib and ending on the other side of the lower block was written ‘fac die decem Augusti (inquaveralit?) 1806 felix mori costa Parmae’. I am reliably informed that this translates roughly as ‘Made on the tenth day of August 1806 Felix Mori Costa Parmae’. It is relatively rare to have internal inscriptions in an Italian instrument other than on the label, and finding one is always an unexpected bonus. Suddenly all fell into place.



Interior of Mori Costa violin showing lower corner block and ink inscription on bottom rib.

Mori Costa is a maker not so often seen, and the unusually fine quality of this instrument may explain the past confusion over it. Parma is a town that has no small place in the history of violin-making, being one of the various towns in which J.B. Guadagnini worked (from 1759 to 1771). His son Giuseppe I (‘il Soldato’), was also known to have worked at Parma, and since he died in 1805 it is quite possible that Mori Costa and he were acquainted, or at least knew each other’s work. It is also impossible to imagine that Mori Costa would not have been familiar with the instruments of J.B. Guadagnini.

The instrument before me had low-placed nicks of the f holes; relatively low-built arching ideal for greater volume of sound; and exceptionally high-quality varnish. These features are all reminiscent of a Guadagnini. However, Mori Costa’s mark is clear – the f hole nicks that don’t cut all the way through the f hole edge, the very particular shape of the lower f hole wings, the way the interior work is finished. But it is not an entirely typical example – finer than most and with a glorious soft red-brown varnish and exquisite scroll. Problem solved, and we are almost certainly the first to know it since the table was last removed, which must have been some time prior to the 1900 opinion. The restored violin is now for sale, and a piece of history can be purchased at a very reasonable price!

After much questioning of various ‘authorities’, the only untranslated part from the inscription inside the Mori Costa is the enigmatic word ‘inquaveralit’. It may read ‘inquaucialit’ or ‘inquauciabit’. It appears that Mori Costa made a habit of adding such inscriptions to his instruments, sometimes making use of unusual (to us) local words. I’m not sure if I am ready for another roller-coaster, but if there is anyone out there who has studied colloquial Parma dialect of the 1800 period I wait to hear from you with bated breath and just a little theme-park trepidation.

Mud from a Scraper

Chapter 4 ‘The Platform Manner’

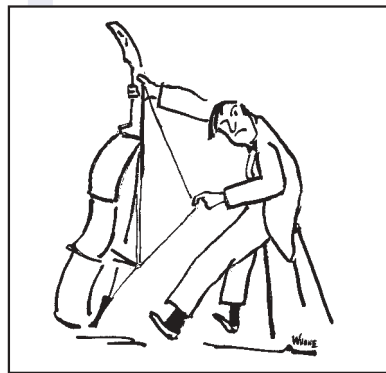
From the unpublished book written in 1951 by violist Jeremy White with cartoons by Herbert Whone. Please allow for the slightly male dominated text – at the time it was written women were rare in orchestras. It represents an interesting and humorous look at the profession of the time.

Aside from all considerations of individual and orchestral technique, there is a strict code of behaviour on concert platforms which has evolved through many generations of musicians. Failure to observe it results in the offender being branded as a beginner, and is a crime for which ten years of impeccable performance are the only expiation. It is easy to overlook points of this code, as the original necessity for most of them has vanished: none, however, is likely to be discarded, as even the best wine of musicianship needs the bush of tradition. The correct attitude of mind assumed by all members of orchestras is one of vague resentment, directed indiscriminately at the programme, which could be shorter, the management, who could be

less grasping, the rest of the orchestra, which could be better, and the conductor, who could hardly be worse. No true professional admits to any enjoyment in his work, though the opus in question may be one of the few he really likes: should any aspect of contemporary music be mentioned in conversation, all remarks are of a deprecatory nature.

An exception to the rule of taking no interest in the music occurs in the works of Beethoven, as he was in the habit of following a long *crescendo* from a *pianissimo* with a *piano*. There are two schools of thought regarding the meaning of this: one holds that he meant a slow, slight *crescendo* – the other that he wanted a large one to be terminated in a *subito piano*. Should any conductor express a preference for either interpretation, the orchestra will immediately argue in favour of the other. Should he make no remark, he will be rewarded with the customary level *mezzo-forte*.

The correct posture, except for front-desk players, differs from that which is taught in the schools of music. The left elbow of violin and viola players rests on the left hip or any other convenient object, the right arm is held as low as possible, and the fingerboard subtends an angle of at least 40 degrees to the horizontal. Cellists and bass players conform more nearly to the scholastic ideal, as it is not possible to get any lower; they instead, lean on them in the most relaxed manner. Whilst a violinist or a violist finds it more convenient to play in the first position – except when the use of higher positions makes it possible for him to play a high passage without disturbing the repose of his elbow or having recourse to artificial harmonics – the cellist and the bassist prefer the fourth, which allows them to rest their left hands on the ribs of their instruments.



‘It is customary to make the string rebound from the fingerboard...’

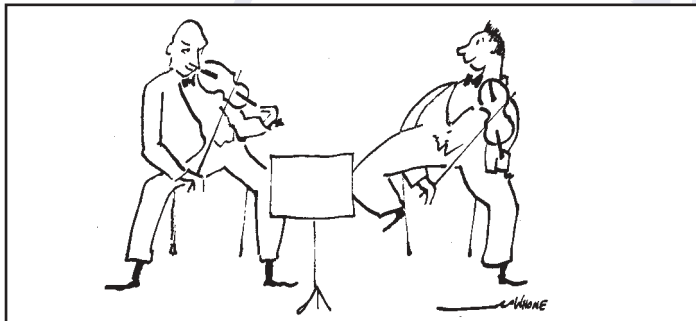
When there is a prolonged *pizzicato* passage, the violinist, and the violist with him, puts his bow on his knee and either turns his instrument so that his chin is resting on its ribs, or lowers it altogether, supporting the scroll on his knee, the button or end-pin on the middle of his waistcoat. It is customary to make the string rebound from the fingerboard in *forte pizzicato* passages.

At our colleges and academies, students are taught many foreign words which denote various styles of playing, subtleties of expression, and so on. Few of the older professionals understand or use them. In an orchestra there are but two styles of bowing – on the string and off it. These may be referred to as ‘*legato*’ and ‘*staccato*’, and the term ‘*spiccato*’ is also occasionally used – occasionally, as that particular effect is usually produced by accident, and is considered too fancy for general adoption. The bow may be bounced, but the process must never be referred to as ‘*ricoché*’, as the term gives an air of authority and calculation to what is otherwise merely a convenient and haphazard method of sounding a note four or five times in rapid but vague succession. The terms ‘*portato*’ and ‘*martele*’ are unheard of. ‘*Sauville*’ is merely a French way of cooking potatoes.

The disdain of elaborate labels is felt for all except the basic directions. It is generally understood that if the conductor wants any extra refinements, he will ask for them. Whether or not his requests will be granted is another matter. A professional rarely uses *vibrato*, save on the longest notes, and when particularly exhorted to do so. Anyone who does so too often is, again, branded as a beginner, because *vibrato* besides being useless in many passages, is never specified in any contract, and musicians are specialists in the art of working to rule.

When, before a concert, the leader taps his stand, and the oboist eventually blows a long A, the ensuing cacophony is generally thought to be produced by the members of the orchestra tuning their instruments. This is not so. The oboe A is a signal for everyone to play the most flashy pieces in their repertoire in the hope of attracting the attention of any influential person who may be present. No string player ever tunes his instrument until the concert is under way, and even then, only if it is absolutely necessary. This is customary for two reasons – because the oboe is always flat, and because it is impossible to tune any instrument while such a noise is going on. Steel strings owe much of their popularity to the fact that they stay in tune from one week to another.

No-one normally uses a different style from his neighbour, as there is rarely enough room on a concert platform. Though this may be used as a legitimate excuse for inaccuracy, most performers habitually harass their neighbours for a few extra inches. Cellists are especially sensitive to lack of space, and indeed, develop a form of claustrophobia if any other instrumentalist comes within a bow-length of them. Where there is obviously enough space for everyone, and the chairs are beyond complaint, the occurrence is remembered so that a worse-favoured hall can on some future occasion suffer from the comparison. The acoustics of various halls differ widely, and players always prefer a resonant one to one in which every domino stands out clearly. Any un-resonant or only normally resonant hall is condemned out of hand.



'No-one normally uses a different style from his neighbour...'

There are similar customs among the pit fraternity in theatres and opera-houses. Apart from never having enough room, the pit musician never has enough light: he constantly apostrophises the management and the electrician, and appropriates more efficient lamps when the opportunity arises. In contrast with the symphony-player's preference for a well hidden position on the platform, the opera-player struggles to be placed near the audience, so that he can the better watch the stage. Or when he becomes bored, which is his natural state, he amuses himself by fitting tunes of a frivolous nature to the accompaniments of the most impassioned arias. His main pastime is that of composing amusing mistranslations of the word-cues in his part, which, usually in Italian or German, often suggest pleasantly bawdy English idioms.



'...cellists are especially sensitive to lack of space'

The pit musician will show interest only in the length of an opera. He may have a preference for *Aida*, but will enjoy *Traviata* more. He may not have much sympathy with Puccini, but *La Boheme* is always popular. *The Ring* is unspeakable, and *Meistersinger* is beyond the pale. He only really likes one opera – *Salome*, which is over by 8:45.

'Interview'

The Maggini Quartet

As with other groups of individuals who come together for a specific purpose, a string quartet may represent very much more than the sum of its parts – the 'X' factor. Now in its 15th year as one of the country's leading chamber music groups, this observation belies the fact that the Maggini's members, all at one time students of Sidney Griller, are every bit as potent on their own as in their success as a quartet.

Although the quartet members' ages vary only slightly, the time span between their instruments differs by about two hundred and fifty years – from the Maggini played by David Angel (from which the quartet takes its name) to the fine J.B.Vuillaume played by their leader, Laurence Jackson. Following close on the heels of the Maggini (in age) is the fine Amati viola

of 1628 played by Martin Outram, and a leisurely third place in the later 18th century is taken by Michal Kaznowski's very worthy Cordanus cello. That's an instrument per century!



*The Maggini Quartet
From left to right: Martin Outram, Michal Kaznowski,
Laurence Jackson and David Angel*

Alongside the full-time commitment of their busy concert and recording activities, the Maggini regularly coach at major music institutions up and down the country, at venues such as Benslow, Harrogate, Oxford, Brunel, Charterhouse and the RAM. Their educational activities abroad have included coaching at Yale and Oberlin in the US and an annual engagement for the Norwegian Chamber Music Society. They have several European trips planned in the near future and other forthcoming projects in the USA and China. The quartet's numerous recordings have won much acclaim – their CD of Vaughan Williams won Gramophone Chamber Music Award of the Year 2001, their recording of Haydn Op.33 quartets was awarded a maximum ten star-rating in France's Repertoire des Disques Compacts, and other awards and nominations are too many to mention.

Despite their great success in the realm of more established repertoire, their enduring passion has always been for the exciting and often underrated chamber works of British composers such as Bridge, Moeran, Ireland, Bax and Bliss. Over the years, they have explored, revived, recorded and generally given wings to a swathe of marvellous music almost forgotten in concert halls today. A real Garden of Heligan in the musical world, it is the surprise of forgotten or little known works coming to life again often for the first time in many decades that seems to excite the Maggini Quartet and its audiences. This began in around 1990 with the quartet's performances of Frank Bridge's *Three Idylls*. As Martin Outram explained, 'Although we had been down the well trodden path of Elgar, Britten and Tippett before this, Frank Bridge's *Three Idylls* was our first foray into lesser-known works and we've never really looked back.'

Since then, in addition to recording mainstream quartets like the Britten, Elgar and Walton, they have also recorded string quartets of E.J. Moeran, and have now recorded all of the Frank Bridge Quartets with one disk still to come out next year. And that's not to mention their commitment to modern music. This has led to important new commissions and, recently, a five year collaboration with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, to perform and record his ten new '*Naxos Quartets*'.

I asked Martin how the quartet's individual strengths worked in rehearsal. 'It's very interesting the way we all individually fluctuate because any one of us can dominate the rehearsal – we see ourselves as democratic as possible. Each of us comes to a rehearsal in a slightly different frame of mind and it always interests me how in certain rehearsals in certain repertoire a particular member will take flight and have lots of ideas on that piece. In those circumstances, unless one's feeling especially inspired oneself, it's better to actually just go with the flow – it's much more interesting if that person's on a real run that day. Rather than kind of nit-pick and hold it back it's better to let that run and see where it takes us. In the end, it's the good ideas that always stick, and the not so good ones fall by the wayside.

'One of the things you have to learn very early on in a string quartet is that it can be fatal to put an idea on the table and stick to it come what may because there are very few ideas in our experience which remain unchanged in some way. And I think that's the nature of string quartets – you can't dig trenches.'



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Martin adds, 'Also, you have to learn in a quartet when to open your mouth and when to keep it closed. Four times the problems of marriage and none of the benefits!' (When Michal read Martin's comment just before we went to print he jokingly retorted, 'Only four?')

I wondered what Martin felt about Maxwell Davies's music. 'The great thing I like about Peter Maxwell Davies is that it works on so many different levels. He knows why every note is there and as far as he's concerned the construction of the pieces is very much along classical lines, sometimes even earlier.' I asked whether he felt the music was noticeably influenced by the environment in Orkney or elsewhere. 'It can be. For example, the last movement of the 3rd quartet apparently was inspired by the sound of the wind rushing through the heather on his island. Another piece I played by him was inspired by a stained glass window – so you never know'.

Finally, I asked Martin what the rest of the year had in store. 'Well, apart from the recording of Maxwell Davies Nos. one and two and the first performance of No. three, one of the important things this year has been the 50th anniversary of Bax's death. Bax is a composer we've fallen head over heels in love with. He is one of those composers whose chamber music, and particularly the three quartets, was virtually unknown. We've absolutely adored recording the quartets and a beautiful viola quintet movement and, having completed the recordings, we've also been able to play two of the quartets on the radio. We're coaching Bax quartets at the Academy, and holding a Bax weekend on the Isle of Man later in the year.

'We are now in the fortunate position, having recorded all these British quartets over the last nine years or so, of going back over some of the ground, and rather than just preparing for recordings and so on, we're now able to really programme them in our repertoire. Some we might think twice about coming back to because they're so difficult, like the Bliss quartets – Nos. one and two, which are fantastic pieces, but very tricky – very virtuosic. And in any case, our powers of possibility are more than taken up by Max at the moment!'

Whether adoring Bax, bringing Bliss to a new audience or simply enjoying the dubious benefits of marriage in a quartet, the Maggini is a force to be reckoned with. $M = X$ to the power of four.

AW



Violin by C.A Testore, Milan 1753



*Felix Mori Costa
Parma 1806*

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(For full discography see www.maggini.net)

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 ['Gramophone' Chamber Music CD of the Year 2001]

***Frank Bridge** String Quartets Nos 1 & 3 on **NAXOS 8.557133**
 [Editor's Choice – 'Gramophone' October 2003]

Shortly to be released on NAXOS:

***Arthur Bliss** (volume 3) including 2nd String Quartet and Clarinet Quintet

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